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About Al Haig's forthcoming book, whose 'ghost' is an ex-spook

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Washington — The thought of a whole book by Alexander M. Haig, Jr., frightens the reader of standard English. It is especially true for those of us condemned by our work to read, or at least to fake familiarity with, the memoirs of contemporary public figures.

Mr. Haig is the man who, while secretary of state, told the world this about the advisability of using nuclear weapons during the Tehran hostage crisis: "The very act of definitizing an answer to this question undercuts the fundamental deterrent on which our peace and security rests."

He was given to "contexting" things, striving to "decouple" himself from his earlier civilian and military duties, and when something seemed irrelevant he said it was "not in the vortex of the pressures under which a constituted political authority had to make a decision."

And so, as his new book about his problems in the Reagan administration approaches the stores, the only literary critics anticipating it with pleasure have been those who dote on the stylistic beauty of computer instruction manuals.

It is my duty here to report that those particular critics will be disappointed. Mr. Haig's "Caveat: Realism, Reagan and Foreign Policy" is written in straight, indeed clear, English.

That is because Mr. Haig did not write it. Between Mr. Haig's desk and the finished book, it ran through the fingers of one Charles McCarry — and that in itself is a fascinating fact.

Mr. McCarry is best known as an author of spy novels. Veterans of the spy business say his books are among the best of the genre, because their atmosphere is most authentic. And that is true because Mr. McCarry himself is a former officer of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Public figures do not like to flaunt the fact that their works are produced by ghost writers. Sometimes they are gracious enough to credit the ghost's role ambiguously in the foreword, with some such words as "I also wish to thank Samuel Johnson for his editorial advice." That phrase is understood within the trade, but not necessarily by the reading public.

Frequently, publishers or authors' agents put together celebrity and writer when the two have never met. Complementary personalities are not the main consideration. Skill, speed and at least passing familiarity with the subject are what is asked of the person providing "editorial advice."

Yet without knowing Mr. McCarry, it is possible to theorize that he and Mr. Haig are a natural pair. Mr. Haig has been known to see conspiracies where others don't, and Mr. McCarry dreams them up to make a living.

In his novels, he has imagined the smuggling of vital secret manuscripts out of Moscow; an intricate oriental plot behind the murder of John F. Kennedy, and an intricate American plot to wipe out a spiritual leader of the Arab world. Nothing Mr. McCarry dreams up is likely to shock Mr. Haig, and vice versa.

But the charm of the current situation is simply that Al Haig and his publisher have chosen an ex-spook for a ghost — and the news is that he has written a book that carries the Haig byline, yet is fully comprehensible to the average college graduate.

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So far its full contents are highly classified, as befits anything from Mr. Haig's files. This time the reason is not national security, but contractual arrangements: *Time* magazine has paid a bundle to run excerpts before the official publication date next month.

But we know already that the book offers the former secretary's inside version of administration response to the shooting of Mr. Reagan and to crises in Central America, Poland, the Falklands and Lebanon. It includes his unflattering evaluation of such survivors in the Reagan circle as Ed Meese and Caspar Weinberger.

And it expresses his opinion on another "peculiar, disembodied, melancholy creature driven by strange hungers, never happy with its triumphs, wanting always to be loved and incessantly suspecting that it is not." In case you didn't recognize it immediately, that is the press.

The description also fits politicians, says the ex-general, but "there the resemblance ends," because while politicians have an obligation to be responsible, the press has none. When a paper prints a national secret, "The failure of patriotism, the betrayal of decency, the treachery are real enough," he says, but it is the official who disclosed the secret who is guilty.

This is his way of smiting his rivals who still hang on at the White House. "In the Reagan administration," he asserts, "leaks were not merely a problem, they were a way of life. . . . Leaks constituted policy," because "the president's closest aides were essentially public relations men ... consummate professionals — 'wizards' is not too strong a word."

The wizards played the press deftly by telling it "everything," and got their version of events on the record because "the press could not risk losing these sources by offending them, so it wrote what it was given," Mr. Haig says.

He also shows that he himself absorbed at least a little public relations wizardry: The sure way for a public figure to win coverage is to kick the press. The press is masochistic, and cannot resist circulating criticism of its methods and motivations. Mr. Haig's book and this column are evidence.